

# *The Study and Use of English in Africa: A Review*

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## **English in French-speaking African countries: The case of GABON\***

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### **Abstract:**

A number of historically French-speaking countries have adopted English as second or one of the official languages. This does not only pose a problem of multilingualism at State level as well as at social level, but it also questions the actual status of English as a language at both levels. In fact, English does not only have to compete with French, but also with native African languages.

This article gives an insight into the status of English in Gabon – a French-speaking country in western central Africa. Gabon has not (yet) adopted English as one of the official languages, but the status of the language needs to be investigated from a sociolinguistic perspective.

The paper retraced the story of English in Gabon by outlining three periods of contact between the English language and the populations of Gabon. The presence of English throughout the three periods is then linguistically attested through an empirical study of English loanwords in the general vocabulary of Gabonese native languages.

The second topic that the article covers is the contemporary situation of the language in the country whose policy refers to it as foreign language. Meanwhile, the influence of the American lifestyle and music, the education system and the elites that were educated in English-speaking countries produce a different social view on the language. This growing social status may signal prominent new developments in the future. This leads the author to set perspectives of the language as it is spoken in Gabon.

## **1 Introduction**

The Republic of Gabon, a French-speaking country, is located in Central Africa. It borders in the North West on Equatorial Guinea, in the North on Cameroon, in the West on the Atlantic Ocean, in the South and East on the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville). The country is administratively divided into nine provinces, which are further divided into districts and communes. Gabon covers 267,667 square kilometres,

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\* I owe to Dr. Carol Puhl-Snyman the idea of looking at English in French-speaking African countries. I am grateful to Prof JC Roux for his insightful comments on this paper. Mr. Serge Stéphane Ibinga also made valuable suggestions. Any error and mistake in this work are my own.

most of which is dense tropical forest, interspersed with savannah, and fed by a river network of which the Ogooué is the most important one.

This article aims at giving an insight into the status of English in this French-speaking African country, as part of describing the Gabonese Language Landscape (GLL). Gabon has not (yet) adopted English as one of the official languages, but the status of the language needs to be investigated from a sociolinguistic perspective. We are concerned with the following topics: (1) an overview of the language diversity in the country introduced through the Gabonese Language Landscape as background of the present study; (2) an outline of the history of English in Gabon; and (3) the current status of the English language in Gabon.

The attempt to determine the status of English in Gabon is motivated by the escalating progress of English into historically French-speaking African countries. In fact, more than 30 African countries use English and/or have it as an official language (Webb & Kembo-Sure, 2000). Many are known to be French-speaking countries. This is the case of Rwanda, Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

This does not only pose a problem of multilingualism at State level as well as at social level, but it also questions the actual status of English as a language at both levels. The present paper comes within the framework of a sociolinguistic interest on comprehending the behavior and the status of English in these countries where English has to compete with both French and native African languages. Special focus is made on the case of the Republic of Gabon, with its complex language diversity.

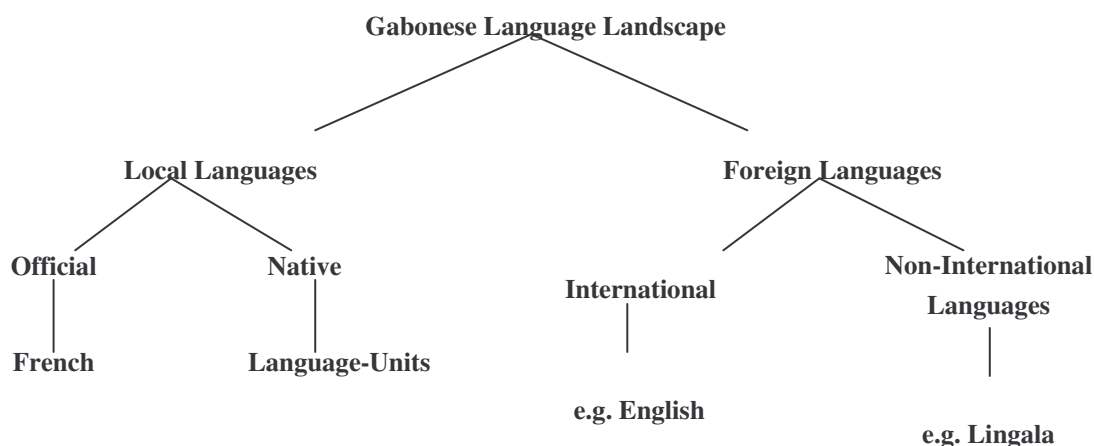
## **2 Background: Gabonese Language Landscape<sup>1</sup>**

In order to describe language diversity in Gabon, Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005) has coined the concept of *Gabonese Language Landscape* (GLL), which should be described fully by studying specifically the sociolinguistic status of each of its components. The GLL aims at reflecting both native and foreign languages in the language census of the country as shown in the figure<sup>2</sup> below.

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<sup>1</sup> For details on the Gabonese Language Landscape (GLL), see Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005, and Forthcoming)

<sup>2</sup> Used with permission from the Editor of *Lexikos*. French is often referred to as local language being the mother tongue of younger generations (Grimes 1996; Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005). See Kwenzi-Mikala (1988, 1990 and 1998), Emejulu and Nzang-Bié (1999) and Dodo-Bounguenza (2002) for details on Gabonese native languages.



This language diversity has been referred to as multilingualism (Perrois, Jacquot and Moussavou 1983; Mba-Nkoghe 1991; Blanchon 1994; Emejulu and Nzang-Bié 1999a; Dodo-Bounguenza 2002; Nzang-Bié 2001).

However, as shown in Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (forthcoming), recent discussions on multilingualism, by amongst others Holmarsdottir (2001) and Moyo (2002 and 2003), have raised the issue of multilingualism with regard to language identity and the implementation of language policy. It could be said, a country whose language policy does not give an equal status to all languages spoken in the country should not be called multilingual, but rather “a country with language diversity”, as multilingualism implies equal status of languages in terms of education, language identity and language policy implementation.

In this respect, Gabon would not qualify as a multilingual country, but rather as a country with linguistic diversity (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza, forthcoming).

Meanwhile (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005: 133, and forthcoming) refers to language landscape as an accurate picture of the languages used in a certain geographical area, including both foreign and native languages in use in that specific area. Denying the concept of linguistic situation, which usually does not pay attention to foreign languages; the concept applies to both multilingual countries and countries with language diversity.

The English language plays a part in this diversity. The following section retraces the story of English in Gabon. It outlines how English was introduced to Gabon and gives

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See Ndinga-Koumba-Binza (2005 and forthcoming) and Tomba Moussavou (2001) for details on foreign languages.

historical evidence by listing loanwords from English into a number of Gabonese native languages.

### **3 History of English in Gabon**

This section aims to give an account of the history of English in Gabon. The history of English, a European language (of the Germanic phylum of Indo-European language family) brought into Africa through both colonialist and evangelical means (Gardinier, 1994), has often been recounted as it is spoken in English-speaking countries only (Crystal, 2004; Jenkins, 2003; Melchers and Shaw, 2003; McArthur, 1998).

However, Baugh and Cable (2002: 1) have pointed out, “*The history of a language is intimately bound up with the history of the people who speak it*”. This historical perspective makes to mention that the English language has got some stories to tell in French-speaking countries with who both the British and the American have been in contact for centuries for various reasons. According to Baugh and Cable (2002: 2):

“The English language of today reflects many centuries of development. The political and social events that have in the course of English history so profoundly affected the English people in their life have generally had a recognizable effect on their language” (Baugh and Cable, 2002: 2).

This is the case in Africa where the language stepped in for the first time by means of imperialism and colonization, and is now kept in by means of technology and neo-colonization, and globalization.

Jenkins (2003: 5-8) points out two dispersals of English:

“The first diaspora, initially involving the migration of around 25, 000 people from the south and east of England primarily to America and Australia, resulted in new mother-tongue varieties of English. The second diaspora, involving the colonization of Asia and Africa led, on the other hand, to the development of a number of second-language varieties, often referred to as ‘New Englishes’” (Jenkins, 2003: 5).

At this stage, we firmly agree with Baugh and Cable (2002: 2) when they state “*the political and cultural history of the English language is not simply the history of the*

*British Isles and of North America but a truly international history of quite divergent societies”.*

An account of the English history in Gabon identifies three phases that correspond to the periods of contact between the English language and the populations of Gabon. The linguistic borrowing that comes within the framework of language contact proves this contact.

### **3.1 The introduction of English to Gabon**

English seemed to have been introduced in Gabon in three periods, i.e. colonization, evangelization and World War II. Each period is herein presented with historical and sociological facts.

#### **3.1.1 Colonization**

English is one of the eight West European languages that became both the standards and the lingua francas of empires built by navigators, traders, soldiers, settlers, bureaucrats, goods and religions in every corner of the world from the fifteenth century onward (McArthur, 1998: 36). The seven other languages are Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish.

The first contact of English in Gabon was through the British imperialism and colonialist ambitions started by the end of eighteenth century. Our research has not yet allowed us to come up with the exact date when the British navigators reached the coasts of Gabon. However, it is recorded that Africa in general had been exposed to English since the fifteenth century (Melchers and Shaw, 2003: 7) as part of the second dispersal pointed above.

According to Jenkins (2003: 7), the second dispersal is summarized as the transportation of English to Asia and Africa.

“The second diaspora took place at various points during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in very different ways and with different results from those of the first diaspora” (Jenkins, 2003: 7).

Jenkins (2003: 7) also notes that the history of English in colonial West Africa is linked to the slave trade and the development of pidgin and creole languages. From the late fifteenth century onwards, British traders traveled at different times to and from the various coastal territories of West Africa, primarily Gambia, Sierra Leone,

Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon (Jenkins 2003: 7). English was employed as a lingua franca both among the indigenous population, and between these people and British traders.

Nowadays, as a result of this relationship, a number of areas of Libreville, the Capital City, and some Gabonese towns still display English names. The English presence lives on in these names. We can quote Cocobeach and Corisco Island, small towns on the northwestern border of Gabon.

Number of these names dates for a very long time. For instance, King R'Ogouarowe (died in 1847) from the Agekaza w'Olanda clan of the Mpongwe ethnic group adopted Glass as his English name when trading with British and Americans, and named his village of the same name (Gardinier, 1994: 181). Gardinier (1994: 181) mentions that King Glass' village "*was the most important trading center in the region. It was the headquarters for British and American traders and after June 1842 the site of an American Protestant mission*". At the present day, the former village of Glass is split into many areas of Libreville: Nombakele, Toulon, Baraka, Centre Ville, London and Glass. The two latter appear to be the vestiges of the English presence in Libreville.

Moreover, King Antchouwe Kove Rapontchombo (circa 1780-1876), known to the French as King Denis and to the British as King William, head of the Asiga clan of the Mpongwe from 1810 to 1876 in the peninsula at the extreme western tip of the Estuary and along the Atlantic, though non literate could speak English, French, Spanish and Portuguese as well as several African languages (Gardinier, 1994: 107).

Imperialistic ambitions of the British made the English to step into Gabon at the early age of colonization. Trade and permanent close contacts exposed the language to the indigenous society leading to naming places and local kings speaking it.

### **3.1.2 Evangelization**

Without being straight mentioned, religion contributed a lot in spreading European languages into colonial Africa. The second contact of the English language in Gabon was undoubtedly through religious means. Earlier in this section, we quoted Gardinier (1994: 181) who wrote that in June 1842 American Protestant missionaries of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) settled in Gabon under the protection of King Glass.

From there they reached Gabon's countryside spreading the gospel of God's kingdom. The inheritance of their work is churches, Protestant schools and denominations such as Eglise Evangélique du Gabon (EEG) and Eglise de l'Alliance Chrétienne et Missionnaire du Gabon (EACMG). Both EEG and EACMG are still attached to the American society of evangelic missions.

These American missionaries were not only the first educators of the Gabonese youth, but also the first English teachers and even more the first linguists to create a writing system of some Gabonese local languages (Mpongwe, Kélé, Séké, Benga, Fang, Yipunu, etc.), although an English-based writing system.

The work of the American missionaries can be summarized in this quote of Gardinier (1994: 319) about Rev. John Leighton Wilson (1809-1886), founder of the American Protestant Mission of the Estuary in Gabon:

“Wilson was the animating spirit of the Protestant mission. Using the orthography developed by John Pickering for American Indian languages, he transcribed Mpongwe into Latin characters, prepared a Mpongwe grammar, a Mpongwe-English dictionary, and translated a portion of the Gospels into Mpongwe. He had these works and religious instructional materials that he prepared printed at Cape Palmas and Gabon on the mission press. He founded the Baraka church east of Libreville and served as its first pastor. He opened schools staffed in part by English-speaking black Americans and West Africans. As part of his campaign against the slave trade, he wrote a pamphlet that was distributed throughout England and influenced members of Parliament” (Gardinier, 1994: 319).

Among missionaries of the ABCFM that made giant works on implanting English in Gabon and in the same time developing Gabonese local languages we also quote William Walker (1808-1896) who completed translation of the entire Bible into Mpongwe and with Ira Preston (1818-1886) made a pioneering exploration up the Nazareth mouth of the Ogooué River halfway to the present-day Lambaréné, the first whites to venture there; Preston studied Fang and Kélé, put both languages in writing and translated portions of the Scriptures into these languages; Robert Hamill Nassau (1835-1921) who became an expert of Benga, Galwa, Kélé and Fang languages as a gifted linguist, observer and medical doctor with many published volumes and manuscripts; he and his sister Isabella (1829-1906) also pioneered in the formation of African teachers, catechists and pastors; James Benjamin van Renssalaer (1814-1869), first printer in Gabon, he helped to print the first works in Mpongwe and taught English and other subjects; and Josiah Dorsey (died in 1860), an Afro-American who



taught in the schools of Cape Palmas (1838-1842) and in Gabon (1842-1855), he learned Mpongwe well and taught in it as well as in English.

The evangelical movement, which brought along early phases of education, can be said to be the second step of the introduction of English in the Gabonese society. American protestant missionaries made effort in educating the indigenous not only in their mother tongues, but also in English while spreading the Gospel at the same time.

### **3.1.3 World War II**

Crystal (1997: vii) had mentioned that the worldwide expansion of English had not happened and did not truly escalate until the Second World War.

After the World War II, German colonies were given to France and England as a reward for winning the war. So were Cameroon and the northern province of Gabon, Woleu-Ntem, to England. Before the war, Woleu-Ntem was German and at some stage it became English, and finally ended up being French as part of Gabon, French overseas district and thereafter colony in the French Equatorial Africa (Mangongo-Nzambi, 1968).

At the present day, Cameroon is still half English-speaking officially, but the Gabonese Northern Province is totally French now. In fact, at the independence declaration of 1960 Gabon proclaimed itself as one state with one official language, while Cameroon chose to be a Federal Republic with two official languages.

The presence of English language in the Gabon's pre- and colonial past caused an interaction between English and Gabonese native languages. The vestiges of this interplay are English loanwords found in Gabonese native languages, as introduced in the following subsection.

## **3.2 Loanwords: Evidence of contact**

Linguistic borrowing, one of the external sources of vocabulary enrichment in a language, has always been the evidence of contact between languages in the past. It is the result of language contact on a society attempting to maintain its language. This is also the case between English and some Gabonese languages.

The process here implies English as the source language and Gabonese native languages as target languages. In other words, English is the donor language and



Gabonese languages are the recipient languages. In fact, English-based words in the vocabulary of many Gabonese languages are pure loanwords.

It is important to mention that a loanword is a lexical item (a word) which has been ‘borrowed’ from one language to another, a word which originally was not part of the vocabulary of the recipient language but was adopted from some other language and made part of the borrowing language’s vocabulary (Campbell 1998: 58).

A number of studies exist on the process of borrowing in some Gabonese languages. A quick glance would mention among others Kwenzi-Mikala (1989) on nominal loanwords in Yipunu; Mayer and Voltz (1990) listing place names, language and ethnic denominations from other language than native Gabonese languages; Raponda-Walker (1998) listing foreign words introduced into a number of Gabonese languages; Mavoungou (2002) on the sociolinguistic and linguistic aspects of borrowing in Yilumbu; and Idiata (to appear) on Isangu lexical noun borrowings from French. However, a number of these studies focus on French as the source language. Loanwords as adopted from English have not yet really been studied in Gabonese languages.

Nevertheless, Mayer and Voltz (1990) listed few English-based denominations, and Raponda-Walker (1998) has compiled an important inventory of English loanwords in few Gabonese languages. Mavoungou (2002), for his part, has considered in English-borrowed items in his sociolinguistic and linguistic study of borrowing in Yilumbu. Mavoungou (2002) outlines the advent of the English language in Gabon and Yilumbu loans from English although “*the English contribution to Yilumbu vocabulary has been small*” (Mavoungou 2002: 43).

Gabonese populations in their respective mother tongues use all words borrowed from English on a daily basis. These loanwords are occurrences of day-to-day conversation. These words are also reminders of the pioneering days of the trading industry (Mavoungou, 2002: 43).

The sample lists below consist in English items integrated in phonetic, phonological and morphological structures of Gabonese native languages specifically mentioned in this paper. The items borrowed include nouns, verbs, names and surnames.

### ***Borrowing from English to Fang***

Tawël <Eng. towel

Mise köt <Eng. mister Scott “*meeting for Bible teaching*”

Sikolo <Eng. school

***Borrowing from English to Yipunu***

Doli <US Eng. Dollar

Uresi <Eng. Rice

***Borrowing from English to Myene***

Dole <US Eng. Dollar

Oresi <Eng. Rice

***Borrowing from English to Yilumbu***

Shoopu <Eng. shop

Bwaatu <Eng. boat

Dibuuku <Eng. book

Ingesi <Eng. English

Booyi <Eng. boy (derogatory term for servant)

Ilasi <Eng. glass

Mbwatila <Eng. bottle

Meeli <Eng. mail (a steamer or packet)

Tsonu <Eng. Sunday

***Some verbs (examples in Myene)***

Bestva <Eng. to best

Topya <Eng. to stop

Minya <Eng. to mean

Kipya <Eng. to keep

***Some Names (examples in Myene)***

Koboti <Eng. cobbuth

Sèlèmani <Eng. sailor-man

Gigi <Eng. gig

***Some Surnames (examples in Myene)***

Daya <Eng. Doyle

Simeti <Eng. Smith

Simeth <Eng. Smith

Solsa <Eng. Schultz

Wolba <Eng. Wolber

Walker <Eng. Walker

(Cf. Raponda-Walker, 1998; Mavoungou, 2002)

However, a corpus of English loanwords still has to be systematically built on the basis of recent corpus-compilation principles. The only lists that exist are those of Raponda-Walker (1998) for Fang and Myene, and Mavoungou (2002) for Yilumbu. These lists record approximately 100 items.

These loanwords may be regarded as a definite proof that Gabonese populations got some contact with English in the past. This contact is even more proven when we consider the Myene surnames borrowed from English seen above. In fact, literature on the borrowing process hardly makes mention of borrowing of surnames.

Borrowing is usually based on technical and cultural items rather than on human names and surnames. However, the borrowing process of surnames from English to Myene is understood within cultural usages of the Myene people. English surnames entered the Myene ethnic group through these people's habit of giving to their newborn child the surname of the person that they seriously befriend. A number of surnames from various ethnic groups and from other European languages entered the Myene people that way (Raponda-Walker, 1998: 154).

Nevertheless, it is equally important to note that marriage was another way that English surnames entered the Myene system. For instance, the nation's most noted scholar to date André Raponda-Walker (1871-1961)<sup>3</sup> was from a British father trader and explorer, Robert Bruce Napoleon Walker (1830-1900), who married an aristocratic Mpongwe, Agnorogoulé Ikoutou (1852-1912), niece of King Georges and a relative of King Louis. Walker is still the surname of a big offspring that came from this marriage.

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<sup>3</sup> Educated in both Gabon and the United Kingdom, Raponda-Walker spoke fluently English, French and 13 native languages.

Another example of surname by marriage is that of Sarah Dorsey (born in 1851), daughter of Protestant Afro-American Josiah Dorsey seen earlier in this section. She married William Lewis Owondo, a Mpongwe trader who became one of the first elders of the American Presbyterian church at Baraka in January 1874. And Dorsey entered the surnames list of the Mpongwe people.

Our view is that history can lie, but linguistic proof never does. English has history in all of Africa. It is related to the past colonial system of the British Empire and Christian Missionaries both from England and the United States of America. But, in the present days it is most of the time related to both the American imperialist tendencies and the globalization process.

Koopman (1994 and 2000) makes use of the term ‘adoptives’ to “*mean words of foreign origin in a language, words which have been taken over and adopted by another language, and then become part of that language*” (Koopman, 2000: 8).

The reason the term of ‘adoptive’ is preferred in this paper than that of ‘loanword’ is because the latter does not reflect the idea of adoption. In fact, it requires a certain time and a number of linguistic mechanisms implying phonetics, phonology, and even morphology and semantics for a language to adopt a foreign word as its own. It is surely not only 10 or 20 years that a language needs to adopt a word with all linguistic mechanisms required and with the social parameters that may enter in consideration.

English has eventually stories to be retraced in Gabon both historically and currently. The section that follows gives an account of the current status in Gabon. It shows the place of English in the Gabonese language policy and introduces social aspects such as how the language is spoken on a daily basis and how it is viewed in society. The section also deals with the position of the language in education.

## **4 The Current Status of English in Gabon**

### **4.1 Foreign language, non-official according to the language policy.**

The current language policy of Gabon is merely stated in one paragraph in the Constitution (1994). It is stipulated,

"The Republic of Gabon adopts French as the official language. Furthermore, she endeavors to protect and promote the national languages" (Art. 2, par. 8) [République Gabonaise 1998].

It is clearly seen that Gabon has nothing to do with foreign languages, except French. Yet, many foreign languages do exist in Gabon. Some have even got larger numbers of speakers than some small local languages (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza, forthcoming).

Among foreign languages, English is coexisting with native languages in Gabon and with many other foreign languages. Foreign languages in Gabon comprise African, European, American and Asian languages. Refugees, businessmen and other migrants who have found peace and prosperity in the country speak these languages (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza 2005 and forthcoming). One reason why foreign languages do exist in any country is the fact that people travel with their mother tongues and speak them as soon as they gather as linguistic communities. For instance, grouping together refugees from the same nation or mother tongue in one place often leads to successful language migration or immigration (Ndinga-Koumba-Binza, forthcoming). Therefore, migrations and other forms of population dispersal do not only contribute to language change (Koopman, 2000: 2), but also stimulate language geographic-extension.

#### **4.2 The language on a daily basis**

English can be said to be daily spoken in Gabon. In fact, British and American migrants inside of their respective communities in Gabon speak English on a daily basis. People from African English-speaking countries (Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, etc.) also use English in their respective communities when they cannot communicate in their (African) mother tongues. In fact, Anglophones from different countries rather communicate in English than in French. For instance, Ghanaians will speak to Nigerians in English; Liberians likewise will speak to South Africans in English, and so on.

It is equally important to note that the number of English-speaking people never decreases below eighty, comprising American citizens of Peace Corps volunteers that come to Gabon every year (Peace Corps, online). The Gabon's chapter of the Peace Corps Organization makes use of American English as the sole medium of communication in all areas of teaching; health and building that volunteers are involved. The volunteers only learn French for the purpose of communicating with local populations.

Nowadays, African English-speaking countries, mainly Nigeria and Ghana, also provide Gabon with a consequential number of English speakers. It is likely possible to find people trading in English at the well-known free market *Gare Routière* in

Libreville where shopkeepers and salespeople are more and more Nigerians or Ghanaians.

Thus, it is possible to state that English fairly-well spoken on a daily basis in Gabon. However, systematic studies still need to be undertaken on the vitality of the English language in Gabon. Outcomes from these studies might show that the number of daily-speakers of English could exceed 1000 including British, Americans, Nigerians and all migrants from English-speaking African countries. For instance, Tomba-Moussavou (2001: 13) who accounts for the sociolinguistic survey done by the *Laboratoire des Sciences Humaines et de la Dynamique du Langage* (LASCIDYL) in 1998-1999 includes English among the six European languages spoken on a daily basis in Libreville, the capital city of Gabon.

### 4.3 Social view

In this subsection we intend to give a bit of the status of the English language in the Gabonese society. The question here is: How does the common Gabonese person view English?

Elo Mintsa and Jones (1986) have presented that fragments of English play the role of vehicle of popular culture in a Francophone setting. According to Elo Mintsa and Jones (1986: 245), the English language plays a role “*in transmitting an international popular mode of expression into non-English speaking social-cultural context*”.

In fact, like many African countries and even some countries of other continents in the world, Gabon is soaked with American music and lifestyle. There is deep a cultural influence among younger generations. Gabonese youngsters and adults listen to all kind of music that comes from the United States, from Tracy Chapman to 50 Cent and Mariah Carey, from Michael Jackson to Beyoncé and so on. We may add into this list gospel singers like Ron Kenoly and Don Moen, and evangelic rap singers like Kirk Franklin and Donnie McClurkin. American preachers like Bishop T.D. Jakes, Jimmy Swaggart and Billy Graham also have good audience and fans in Gabon.

It is important to mention that as far as music is concerned, Gabonese population listen with high esteem Anglophone music. Artists from the United Kingdom such as Elton John, and from Canada such as Céline Dion, are given good ear and appreciated in Gabonese nightclubs, social events, and TV and radio broadcastings. According to Elo Mintsa and Jones (1986: 247), describing the situation twenty years back from now:

“By far the greatest source of English entering into Gabon is through the songs over mass media radio. Certain music programming at prime times have over 80 percent English language song transmission” (Elo Mintsä and Jones, 1986: 247).

Nowadays, mass media radio still provides English at the same level but sources of English entering into Gabon have multiplied. And, cultural values are carried in through cinema and TV channels.

The worldwide TV channel CNN is watched in English. In the same time, Hollywood movies are watched with lots of preference in Gabonese movie theatres and movie stars are well known by their Gabonese numerous fans. Gabonese populations have no problem with *The Bold and the Beautiful*, *Sunset Beach* and other American serials broadcasted everyday in national and private TV channels. Both movies and serials are shown in the French language, but the American lifestyle and culture are still conveyed in a good way.

The overall of this American lifestyle and culture is the attitude by youngsters of feeling well educated for knowing some English. This is because the language appears to be the language known by some privileged elites that studied in the United Kingdom, in Canada and in the United States.

This gives sense to the statement of Elo Mintsä and Jones (1986: 245) when they assert that “*the English language itself has now become the popular culture trend*”. Elo Mintsä and Jones (1986: 245) also elucidate that “*the social acculturation process inherent in the contemporary function of English as a language of wider communication in the linguistic repertoire of a multilingual African state*”. Gabon might be that “multilingual African state”.

Finally, Elo Mintsä and Jones (1986: 253) had documented and classified various manifestations of popular English in Libreville. These manifestations are still up to date as follows.

- (i) Ornamentation, i.e. the use of English words, mottos, denominations to decorate or lend aesthetic appeal. This ornamental English manifests itself in dress (words in hats, tee-shirts, jeans, bags, etc.); in habitations (posters on walls, labels on mugs and glasses, words on dish cloth and towels, etc.); and on personal belongings (vehicles, adhesive labels on cars, school supplies, carrying cases, bags, etc.).



- (ii) Names of places such as places of entertainment including game rooms (Le Space, Bowling Store, etc.), night-clubs (Vertigo, Night Fever, Snack Bar, etc.). Shopping centers often also display names in English: City Sport, Broadway, City Market, etc.
- (iii) Names of people, i.e. the intention of “rephonologicalizing” African names into English approximation as in **(a)**, and of substitution of English forenames for French as in **(b)** below.

**(a)**

Kombila >Eng. Kombell

Obiang >Eng. Ob’s

Ropinia >Eng. Rop’s

Mackosso >Eng. Mackson

**(b)**

Jean-Rodrigue >Eng. John Rock

Daniel >Eng. Danny

Jean-Frédéric >Eng. John Fred

Jean-Aimé >Eng. John Love

- (iv) Borrowings, i.e. use of English words or phrases for conversational purpose (e.g. Ok, Alright, Hey, etc.); for functional purpose (e.g. Shampooing, jogging, footing, yachting, etc.); and technical purpose (e.g. walkman, badge, talkie-walkie, mixer, etc.).

Elo Mintsä and Jones (1986: 253) emphasize that “*the use of these manifestations is effective due to a certain tacit understanding and appreciation among users*”.

#### 4.4 Status in education

As a foreign language the status of English is quite clear through the education system, which allows for the teaching of some European languages such as English, German, Italian and Spanish as subjects in high schools and in some higher education schools. But, English is the most privileged because it is taught from secondary schools to the university in government-controlled educational institutions.

In secondary and high schools the language is taught as a second language, the first language being French. A growing number of private pre-primary and primary schools, the called *Ecoles multilingues*, are also offering English as subject from the very first level of education.

The government has ever since been promoting English through national curricula for high and secondary schools: now three hours a week in all government schools.

At the university level, the government has also allowed the creation of English departments at Omar Bongo University (UOB), at Masuku University (USTM)<sup>4</sup> and at the School of Education (ENS). The government sponsors the majority of students and research projects in these departments.

The Department of English at UOB offers both undergraduate and postgraduate programs in English literature, linguistics and civilizations with English as the sole medium of instruction.

The Department of English at ENS focuses on the training of qualified English teachers has been a focal priority. The School now sends exchange students to England and South Africa for nine-months training in the field of English didactics and teaching. These students hold Bachelor or Master degrees in Arts on the field of English literature, linguistics and civilizations before they are sent.

The Departments of English, respectively at Omar Bongo University and at the School of Education, use English as medium of teaching at the postgraduate level. For instance, theses and dissertations are compulsory written in English.

The Department of English at the Masuku University, which is a technological institution, focuses on making students to acquiring English terminology in their core subjects.

Finally, the Gabonese government is no longer hesitating to send government-sponsored students in English-speaking countries (USA, United Kingdom, South Africa, etc.) for any kind of studies.

#### **4.5 Private Initiatives**

It is important to mention that activities of some private institutions that also play a role in setting up the English language in Gabon.

- English Language Institute (ELI): A center that deals with the promotion of English in the areas of document translation, interpretation, private courses, English library, sport and scientific competitions, Internet, cooperative research with university English departments, etc. ELI makes use of documentary funds and infrastructures inherited from the former American

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<sup>4</sup> Omar Bongo and Masuku are the two biggest and oldest government-controlled universities of the country. Gabon also has another government-controlled university that is the Health Sciences University in Owendo.

Cultural Center in Libreville and from the former SIL Congo/Gabon, a chapter of the SIL International (Summer Institute of Linguistics).

- The number of *Ecoles multilingues* is growing fast, and they are gaining more and more preference because of the second international language they offer<sup>5</sup>;
- A number of companies and businesses in both private and governmental sectors are now training their employees in the knowledge of English as second language of transnational communication.

The American NGO, Peace Corps, has settled in Gabon. The teaching of English in rural-areas high and secondary schools is one of their main activities. English clubs are created in high and secondary schools of both urban and rural areas.

For instance, the Rosa Parks English Club at the J.B. Moandat Secondary School is very active in the small town of Mayumba (3°23'S, 10°38'E). Three Peace Corps volunteers are in charge of this club that has a well-organized library in the center of the town. The Club organizes public lectures and several manifestations in order to promote the English language and cultures in the school and in the town. For example, during the English Evening held every semester the students and the community enjoy Anglophone music, drama, movies, etc. The English Day, every Wednesday, is for students to speak only in English to each other and to English-teachers either at school or in town. English teachers are also submitted to this English Day rule.

The current status of the English language in Gabon allows projecting perspectives. These are introduced in the following section, which also leads to conclusion.

## **5 Perspectives and Conclusion**

The specific worldwide situation of the English language gives it a promising future in Gabon. A number of authors have described the emergence of English as super-international language (Baugh and Cable, 2002; Batibo, 1997 and 2005).

This emergence is also and definitely observable in French-speaking African countries like Gabon where the English language is now often used in diplomacy, regional cooperation and international affairs. English is also used in science,

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<sup>5</sup> Some *Ecoles multilingues* offer up to Spanish and Arabic.

information technology, education and all related fields. In summary, English is just taking over the ex-colonial language.

This paper supports the claim that English is indeed becoming an international medium of new trends and technologies in all fields and a worldwide vehicle of popular values. In this regard, English has a good future in Gabon for being:

- An asset for a good job with regard to globalization, international affairs, etc. (Bruthiaux, 2003; Ammon, 2003)
- An asset for the development of the country also with regard to globalization, international affairs, etc. (Emejulu, 2000; Emejulu & Nzang-Bie, 1999b)

This paper has tried to investigate from a historical and sociolinguistic approach the status of English in Gabon. It has been shown through three periods of introduction, i.e. Colonization, Evangelization and World War II, that English has a strong history in this French-speaking country. This history is attested through an observation of English loanwords in the vocabulary of Gabonese native languages.

The current fast-growing of the situation of English in Gabon might pose a problem of multilingualism at both State level and at social level as well. This paper has focused on the actual status of English as a language at both levels within the Gabonese Language Landscape (GLL).

Finally, the progress of the English language in Gabon can lead to set it as a second official language as it is already set in some non-English-speaking countries in the African continent (Rwanda, Equatorial Guinea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, etc.)

This will comply with the appearance of English as global language. In fact, the emergence of the USA as sole superpower and the growth of international trade as part of the globalization phenomenon reinforce English as global language (Bruthiaux, 2003: 9).

However, we should be careful in making hasty predictions. This gives sense to Baugh and Cable (2002: 5) when they state:

“The extent and importance of the English language today make it reasonable to ask whether we cannot speculate as to the probable position it will occupy in the future. It is admittedly hazardous to predict the future of nations; the changes during the present century in politics

and populations of the developing countries have confounded predictions of fifty years ago” (Baugh and Cable, 2002: 5).

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